

DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENT AND CONSERVATION - PRESCRIBED BURNING PROGRAM

253. Mr M.P. WHITELY to the Minister for the Environment:

Can the minister update the house on the progress of the Department of Environment and Conservation's prescribed burning program?

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN replied:

I thank the member for his question and his interest in the burning program. The burning program is an important issue. I need to highlight that last winter was the driest on record in most of the south west. For that reason, the department carried out a reduced burning program of about 95 000 hectares in spring throughout the three forest regions from Moore River in the north through to Walpole in the south. Very dry conditions over summer and early autumn, of course, also meant that DEC was restricted in the amount of prescribed burning it could undertake over that period, especially in the karri forest where differing fuel types become available for burning. The department has identified 127 burns, totalling an area of 165 000 hectares, as suitable for prescribed burns this autumn. Eighty of these burns have been carried over from last year, and the proposed autumn program is intentionally larger than can be achieved to provide flexibility to take advantage of prevailing weather conditions across the forest areas.

Members will be interested to note that rain over much of the south west in the past two weeks has resulted in the wettest April in five years. This has meant that it is now too wet to burn the karri forest, and all other burning will be restricted until the conditions dry. The department hopes to undertake prescribed burns over 105 000 hectares this autumn. This is now possible and it is likely that only about 20 000 hectares will be achieved. This will bring the total area of prescribed burns on land managed by the department in the south west for 2006-07 to 115 000 hectares, which is below the nominal annual target of 200 000 hectares for biodiversity conservation, community protection and native forest regeneration.

It is also important to note that the department has been holding a series of seminars, briefings and information sessions to engage stakeholders, special interest groups and local communities throughout the south west. These groups include the grape and wine producers who have expressed concerns about the recent impact of smoke on wine quality. However, given the early grape harvest this year and the recent rain, the smoke is not expected to be of concern to the industry this autumn. If any member of the house would like a briefing on the department's burning program, I would be very happy to arrange it.